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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the ways in which economics, as a discipline, has been influenced by feminist scholarship in the field. It explains that feminist work in transforming economics began to gain ground only in the early 1990s, and that the impact of feminist or multicultural insights on the core research assumptions of the discipline has been minor. The essay notes that economics differs from most other social sciences in that it is built around a single, highly influential core paradigm. The mainstream of economics is built around the neoclassical model of human behavior which assumes that all activity is a result of rational, self-interested choices by autonomous individuals. Feminists have challenged all of the underpinnings of this model, along with traditional teaching and research methods. A less gender-biased discipline would use characteristics associated with both sides of the old dualistic thinking about gender (such as reason versus emotion and self-interested versus other-interested) to analyze the behavior of both men and women. The document includes an annotated bibliography and a list of related electronic resources. (MDM)

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ECONOMICS

Discipline Analysis

Julie Nelson
Brandeis University

WOMEN in the CURRICULUM

HEO 32679

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Women in the Curriculum

ECONOMICS

Discipline Analysis

Julie A. Nelson

Brandeis University

National Center for
Curriculum Transformation
Resources on Women
1997

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PREFACE

Since the 1970s feminist and multicultural scholarship has been challenging the traditional content, organization, methodologies, and epistemologies of the academic disciplines. By now this scholarship is formidable in both quantity and quality and in its engagement of complex issues. The National Center for Curriculum Transformation Resources on Women is therefore publishing a series of essays that provide brief, succinct overviews of the new scholarship. Outstanding scholars in the disciplines generously agreed to write the essays, which are intended to help faculty who want to revise courses in light of the new information and perspectives. Each essay is accompanied by a bibliography that includes references for further reading, resources for the classroom, and electronic resources.

Elaine Hedges

Series Editor

ECONOMICS

Lagging behind other disciplines by ten to twenty years, feminist work in transforming economics only began to gain steam in the early 1990s. While some earlier work had pointed to the neglect of women as subjects in economic studies and raised some questions about the assumptions behind economic models, this more recent wave of feminist work has gone beyond the "add women and stir" approach and probed more deeply into questions about the foundations of the discipline. A new spate of publications appeared around the beginning of the 1990s, and a new organization was formed (International Association for Feminist Economics, 1991), with specialized conferences (beginning in 1992) and a journal (first published in 1995). Feminist economists are, however, still relatively few, and at the time of this writing a strong multicultural voice has yet to develop. While some curriculum projects in economics incorporating both gender and race have been very active (see Amott and Matthaei, 1991; Feiner, 1994; and the Feiner and Bartlett project), the impact of feminist or multicultural insights on the core research assumptions of the discipline has, to date, been minor.

Economics differs from most of the other social sciences in having a single, highly influential, core paradigm. The mainstream of economics is built around the "neoclassical" model of human behavior, in which all activity is seen as the result of rational, self-interested choices by autonomous individuals, whose preferences are set in advance.

Towson University, Baltimore, MD

The methods which receive highest regard are those which use formal logic, mathematics, and high-powered statistical theory. The paradigmatic type of economic activity is seen as buying and selling in markets, and economic analysis is often defined as the study of choices people make in a context of scarcity. Policy recommendations are often based on theoretical conclusions that assume the existence of well-functioning, efficient, competitive markets. Pedagogy tends to follow the traditional classroom model of lecture and exam. While this is too simple a picture of all of economics, it does describe the core beliefs and practices that set the standard by which all work is measured and evaluated as either "economics" or "not economics." The schools of thought which compete with Neoclassicism (e.g., Institutionalism, Marxism, Austrian economics, etc.) are rarely represented in U.S. institutions.

Feminists have challenged all of these aspects—model, methods, definition, policy approach, and pedagogy—of mainstream economics. For the most part, the challenges do not take the form of recommendations that all previous work be thrown out, perhaps to be replaced by a stereotypically "feminine" economics (e.g., emphasizing words over math, or cooperation over competition). Nor is it advocated that there is a distinct "female" economics that would be practiced by women economists only. What is advocated, instead, is a recognition of how masculine biases have shaped the notion of what counts as valuable economic knowledge, and an investigation into how a less gender-biased discipline could yield a more reliable understanding of economic phenomena.

Regarding the model of human behavior to be adopted by economists, the model of rational, autonomous, self-interested, preference-driven behavior can be seen to reflect a view of human nature that is linked, both historically and psychologically, to male (and specifically Euro-Amer-

ican and middle class) gender norms. In contrast, the stereotyped image of femininity emphasizes emotion, connection, other-interest (at least as regards husband and family, the presumed center of the female's life), and openness to influence and change. In seeing only the male side of the culturally gendered, dualistic view of humans as setting the standard for models of "human" behavior, economists have suppressed explanations that might draw on a broader view of human nature. Feminists have pointed out that the model of self-interest and autonomy does not represent rigor in analysis, as is commonly thought, but reflects a gender- (and race- and class-) biased view.

The criticism of standard practice, then, is not that it is "too objective," but rather that it is not objective enough. Feminist scholars have argued for a new and richer definition of scientific "objectivity," in which the guarantor of reliability is not believed to be the presumed detachment of the observer from the observed, but rather the engagement of the researcher in a community of scholars in which diverse viewpoints are recognized and represented (see, for example, Harding, 1995). Objectivity is not reached by ignoring or suppressing the fact that each scholar views the world from a particular standpoint, but rather by recognizing the importance of these standpoints in creating knowledge.

A less gender-biased discipline would use characteristics associated with both sides of the old dualistic thinking about gender (e.g., reason/emotion, self-interested/other-interested) to analyze the behavior of both male and female economic agents (see Nelson, 1996). Standard models of wage determination, for example, emphasize the influence of the productivity of the workers (their "marginal products," in microeconomics terminology) and market conditions in a rather mechanistic fashion. Broader models would also take into account the emotional and connected

nature of workers and employers: their concerns about fairness, for example, and workers' interest in what their colleagues are earning. The relative importance of such factors can only be determined empirically, not *a priori* by limiting one's models.

The primacy of mathematical and abstract methods has also been questioned. While mathematics and logic play a role in analytical work, too much emphasis on them may lead to a fascination with technical sophistication that can lead to actual decreases in the quality of economic studies. Empirical investigation has lesser status in the discipline than abstract analysis; data gathering techniques are not generally taught; and qualitative analysis and primarily verbal work are sometimes actively despised. While feminists have not been the only economists to point to the problems caused by this neglect and devaluation of less formal ways of gaining knowledge, work by feminist scholars such as Evelyn Fox Keller (1986) and Susan Bordo (1987) on the masculine roots of the fascination with abstraction have been put to good use in discussing economic methodology.

The definition of economics in terms of market activity has long been problematic for feminists. One feminist critique of standard practice that has become well-known, to the point of entering many economics textbooks, is the neglect of household (primarily female) labor in the computation of Gross Domestic Product. Household labor, and indeed all of the internal workings of households, have often been considered to be outside the sphere of economics, and therefore unsuitable for study. Women's economic contributions, as well as the economic well-being of dependent women and children within households, were simply invisible in studies based on the monetized activities of male "household heads." Such omission

has been shown to be particularly devastating, from a policy point of view, when applied to developing countries. Whether remedying the specific problem with GDP in developed countries should be given high priority is a topic of some disagreement among feminists. Some argue that assigning monetary value to traditional "women's work" is an important step in improving women's status (Waring, 1988). It has also been pointed out, however, that too much emphasis on this question might unfortunately strengthen the association of women with the household sphere, at a time when women are moving increasingly into other activities.

The focus on individual, autonomous *choice* as the defining feature of economic analysis has also eclipsed an understanding of economics as being concerned with the provisioning of human life. While the person-on-the-street usually understands "economics" as being concerned with how people provide sustenance for themselves and their dependents, via their work and other activities, such an emphasis on the material requisites of life is notably lacking in the academic definition of the discipline. Unemployment, for example, has been suggested by one leading economist to be interesting only to the extent that we study why someone *chooses* to be unemployed (see discussion in Nelson, 1996). Studies of the distribution of wealth and income, and the resultant divergence in people's standards of living, are not part of the core economics curriculum. Scholars interested in race and class have pointed out that such a definition of economics tends to serve the interests of those who disproportionately hold the wealth. Feminist theorists have linked the neglect of the provisioning aspect of economics to insights from feminist theory on the historical linking of women with nature and care of the body, and of all of these with inferiority. New literature on women in development (Tinker, 1990) and women and eco-

nomic restructuring (Bakker, 1994), as well as literature on work and poverty from other disciplines, can begin to fill up this lacuna.

The role played by the image of the well-functioning market in policy prescriptions by economists should not be overstated, since much work has also been done about imperfectly competitive markets, transaction costs, and other modifications. The tenacity of this image as a general fallback position, however, is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in discussions of wage discrimination by sex or race. In spite of volumes of evidence on the existence of discrimination from court cases (a source of evidence considered "only anecdotal" by the current empirical standards of the discipline) and much discussion of statistical studies, the argument that "discrimination will disappear because non-discriminators will make higher profits in competitive markets" is still a central part of many academic, and most textbook, discussions (see, for example, Polachek in Kuiper and Sap, 1995). The pronouncement that government policy has no role to play often follows. In questioning the validity of a central image of beneficent competitive markets, feminists have sometimes found common ground with their colleagues in Radical and Institutionalist economics, who are more likely than Neoclassical economists to take questions of power differentials seriously. It should be noted, however, that feminists have also pointed out androcentric biases in these other schools as well (see, for example, Folbre and Jennings in Ferber and Nelson, 1993).

Economics curriculum and pedagogy have come under investigation by economists interested in issues of gender, race, and class. Neglect of differences in experiences by gender, race, and class in textbooks has been pointed out, and "classroom climate" factors, common to other disciplines as well, have been analyzed for economics. Fe-

male and minority students may, for example, find the model of self-interested, detached choice to be less attractive as an explanation of human behavior, if they are only too aware of the ties and constraints that often strongly influence, if not determine, a person's path. The notion of the world as a realm in which one's agency and interests will have free play may be a notion that is found to be more plausible by whites, males, and those from privileged classes. Regarding pedagogy, there is some evidence, for example, that using cooperative group projects instead of (or in addition to) competitive individual work, and giving essay rather than (or in addition to) multiple choice exams, may make a difference in terms of relative performance among gender and other groups.

At the time of this writing, feminist economics has gained a voice through publications, conference sessions, new courses and curriculum projects. It has not, however, yet succeeded in making the bulk of the discipline take note of the gender biases in the discipline's core assumptions. Perhaps more than other disciplines, economics is protected by its core paradigm from any critique of a social constructionist type. The very idea that any study of the history, philosophy, or social structure—much less the gendered nature—of the economics discipline could be enlightening and lead to improvements, may seem peculiar to many economists. Many consider the central paradigm to be much like revealed truth, following self-evidently from (nineteenth-century) scientific principles. While curriculum projects have resulted in units or specialized courses on gender and/or race now being offered in many economics departments at many colleges and universities, the emphasis still tends to be on how standard tools can be applied to "women's" or "racial" issues, rather than on how a feminist or multicultural perspective can help to transform the discipline. There is still a long way to go.

Bibliography

For the Classroom

Textbooks:

Amott, Teresa L. and Julie A. Matthaei. (1991). *Race, Gender, & Work: A Multicultural Economic History of Women in the United States*. Boston: South End Press.

This is the only explicitly feminist and multicultural economics text available, though its use may be somewhat limited in mainstream departments because of its Marxist tone. It includes chapters on American Indian, Chicana, European-American, African-American, Asian-American, and Puerto Rican women, drawing on an impressive range of historical and statistical research.

Blau, Francine D. and Marianne A. Ferber. (1992). *The Economics of Women, Men, and Work*. 2nd edition. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

First published in 1986, this book has been the standard for undergraduate economics courses dealing with gender issues. The authors explicitly state their feminist beliefs, and to a limited extent criticize, as well as use, the explanations offered by mainstream economic models. It mentions some differences in economic experiences among women by race, but does not have a multicultural focus.

Jacobsen, Joyce P. (1994). *The Economics of Gender*. Cambridge: Blackwell.

This newer undergraduate textbook features mainstream economic analysis of labor markets and house-

hold decision-making. It includes a short chapter on race, ethnicity, and class, and a short section on critiques of the mainstream approach. While it is more detailed and current in some sections than the Blau and Ferber text, it is also less critical of mainstream theories and does not take an explicitly feminist approach.

Anthology:

Feiner, Susan F., ed. (1994). *Race & Gender in the American Economy: Views from Across the Spectrum.* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

This is a collection of short articles dealing with race and gender issues, accompanied by useful original introductory essays by the editor and others, and study questions. Topics include inequality, discrimination, unemployment, education, family structure, day care, welfare, community organization, and health, and each section includes essays from conservative, liberal, and radical points of view. Authors include, for example, both George Gilder and Susan Faludi. It is suitable for use as a readings book in an undergraduate course.

Selected Articles:

Nelson, Julie A. "Feminism and Economics." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 9(2), Spring 1995, 131-148.

A brief summary of feminist commentary on economic models, methods, topics, and pedagogy.

Bergmann, Barbara R. "Does the Market for Women's Labor Need Fixing?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 3(1), Winter 1989, 43-60.

A useful short piece on discrimination and antidiscrimination policies.

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Dixon, Vernon. "The Di-Unital Approach to 'Black Economics.'" *American Economic Review* 60(2), 1970, 424-429.

Examines basic economic assumptions from an African-American perspective.

Harding, Sandra. "Can Feminist Thought Make Economics More Objective?" *Feminist Economics* 1(1), Spring 1995, 7-32.

Written by a feminist philosopher, this article explains Harding's influential insights regarding "strong" versus "weak" objectivity, and their applications to the discipline of economics.

For the Instructor

Curriculum Projects:

Feiner, Susan and Robin Bartlett. *Improving Introductory Economics Education by Integrating the Latest Scholarship on Women and People of Color.*

This was a series of faculty development conferences sponsored by the National Science Foundation in 1992 - 1995. The principal product of these conferences was a set of race and gender balanced examples, each of which uses active student learning and student centered pedagogies to teach important economic concepts. A follow-up project is "Improving Introductory Economics Education by Integrating the Latest Scholarship on Women and People of Color." For information, contact Susan Feiner at sffein@usm.maine.edu or at Women's Studies and Economics, University of Southern Maine, PO Box 9300, Portland, ME 04104-9300.

Quade, Ane, ed. (1994, 1995). *The Feminist Economics Curriculum Project.*

Undertaken for the Pedagogy Committee of the International Association for Feminist Economics, these volumes are collections of course syllabi from undergraduate and graduate courses on "Women and the Economy" and the like, and examples of incorporation of feminist themes into classes on economic history, macro-economics, and research methods. (See also electronic lists under FEMECON-L). Contact Ane Quade at ane@saclink.csus.edu or at the Department of Economics, California State University - Sacramento, Sacramento, CA 95819-6082 for copies of the volumes on disk.

Selected Articles on Curriculum and Pedagogy:

"Alternative Pedagogies and Economic Education." *American Economic Review* 82(2), May 1992, 559-577.

This is a collection of three papers presented at the American Economics Association annual meetings, including discussion of "Women in the Economy" courses and feminist pedagogy.

Feiner, Susan F. and Bruce B. Roberts (1990). "Hidden by the Invisible Hand: Neoclassical Economic Theory and the Textbook Treatment of Race and Gender." *Gender & Society* 24(2): 145-62.

A review of textbooks, critical of neoclassical theory in general (from a Marxist perspective) as well as of gender biases in particular.

Feiner, Susan (1993). "Introductory Economics Textbooks and the Treatment of Issues Relating to Women and Minorities, 1984 and 1991." *Journal of Economic Education* 24(2): 145-62.

A follow-up to earlier articles, this study finds continued stereotyping in topics related to race and gender. It includes as an appendix a document entitled "Guidelines for Recognizing and Avoiding Race and Gender Bias in Economics."

Ferber, Marianne A. (1990) "Gender and the Study of Economics," in Phillip Saunders and William B. Walstad, eds., *The Principles of Economics Course: A Handbook for Instructors*. New York: McGraw-Hill, pp. 44-60.

This short article reviews studies done of differences in performance in economics courses by gender, and outlines issues of gender bias in subject matter and classroom climate.

"Race and Gender in Economics 101." *American Economic Review*, 85(2), May 1995, 352-371.

This is a collection of four papers presented at the American Economics Association annual meetings on the topics of race, gender, and pedagogy.

Shah, Sumitra. (1996). "Gender in Introductory Economics Textbooks," in Nahid Aslanbeigui and Michele I. Naples, *Rethinking Economic Principles: Critical Essays on Introductory Textbooks*. Chicago: Irwin, pp. 44-61.

Reviews current editions of five leading texts, and presents critiques and suggestions for improved incorporation of gender.

Journals:

Feminist Economics. This journal began publication in Spring 1995. It is sponsored by the International Association for Feminist Economics (IAFFE), and published by Routledge. Each issue includes articles, book reviews, and an "explorations" section for short contributions, comments, and responses from a variety of perspectives.

The Review of Black Political Economy. Sponsored by the National Economic Association, the editorial policy statement of this journal states that it is "devoted to the examination of issues related to the economic status of black and Third World peoples" with an orientation towards "analysis of policy prescriptions designed to reduce racial economic inequality."

Edited Volumes (with chapters suitable for classroom use):

Bakker, Isabella, ed. (1994). *The Strategic Silence: Gender and Economic Policy.* London: Zed Books.

Focusing on macroeconomics and economic restructuring, the authors in this volume present both conceptual and case-study (Canada, Indonesia, Turkey, Mexico, Chile, Iran) examinations of the gendered impact of structural adjustment policies.

Ferber, Marianne A. and Julie A. Nelson, eds. (1993). *Beyond Economic Man: Feminist Theory and Economics.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

This is a collection of original essays examining the central tenets of economics from a feminist point of

view. Topics include the social construction of gender; masculine biases in definition, model, and method; economic rhetoric; and Neoclassical, Socialist, and Institutionalist economics. The "discussion and challenges" section includes an essay on race and feminist economic theory.

Humphries, Jane, ed. (1995). *Gender and Economics*. Brookfield: Edward Elgar.

This is a collection of the full texts of important, if widely varying, published articles on gender. The collection goes back to include F. Y. Edgeworth in 1923, moves through Gary Becker's theories and various discussions of occupational segregation and discrimination beginning in the 1960s, and comes up to the new wave of feminist critiques beginning around 1990. Priced in a range unattractive to individuals, it is suitable as a library reference book and source of ideas for undergraduate or graduate readings.

Kuiper, Edith and Jolande Sap, eds. (1995). *Out of the Margin: Feminist Perspectives on Economics*. London: Routledge.

Arising from an international conference held in Amsterdam in 1993, the nineteen contributions in this book cover the herstory of economics, gender bias in the philosophy of economics, economic theory, the (re)construction of data, and feminist economics and the empowerment of women. A variety of viewpoints is expressed, with some international focus.

Tinker, Irene, ed. (1990). *Persistent Inequalities: Women and World Development*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Describes the history of, and current research in, the field of women in development. Topics include the roles of market work and legal entitlements, the impact of technology, and intra-household "cooperative conflicts."

Selected Single-Authored Books:

Bergmann, Barbara R. (1986). *The Economic Emergence of Women.* New York: Basic Books.

While now slightly dated, this book is a major resource on the history and policy related to discrimination against women in the U.S.

Bordo, Susan (1987). *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Along with Harding (1986) and Keller (1986), this scholar opened up the investigation into gender norms and the development of scientific thought.

Folbre, Nancy (1994). *Who Pays for the Kids? Gender and the Structures of Constraint.* London: Routledge.

This book presents an analysis of the distribution of the 'costs of caring,' seen as based in "individual choices within interlocking structures of constraint based on gender, age, sexual orientation, nation, race, and class." After initial analysis of the relation of feminist theory to political economy, comparative histories for Northwestern Europe, the U.S., and Latin America and the Caribbean are presented.

Harding, Sandra (1986). *The Science Question in Feminism.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Written by a philosopher, this book has influenced much subsequent thinking about the relationship between gender and science.

Keller, Evelyn Fox (1986). *Reflections on Gender and Science*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

This influential book examines the gender norms underlying the rise of modern science.

Nelson, Julie A. (1996). *Feminism, Objectivity, and Economics*. London: Routledge.

This book extends feminist analysis of the influence of masculine norms on the development of Western science to the case of economics. The emphasis is on delineating the ways in which a less gender-biased discipline could most profitably develop. Applications include the theory of the family, income tax policy, and macroeconomics.

Waring, Marilyn (1988). *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics*. New York: Harper & Row.

This is a well-known book written in a popular style, which argues strongly for the inclusion of women's traditional activities into systems of national economic accounts.

Electronic Resources

FEMECON-L is an electronic mailing list sponsored by the International Association for Feminist Economics (IAFFE). Use is not limited to members of IAFFE, nor is the list (currently) moderated. Announcements, requests, and discussions of issues related to feminism and economics make up the bulk of the list's activity. (To

subscribe, send the message SUBSCRIBE FEMECON-L to LISTSERV@BUCKNELL.EDU)

The FEMECON-L archives contain course syllabi and lists of working papers, as well as the FEMECON-L user's guide and files of past postings. (To get a list of files, send the message INDEX FEMECON-L to LISTSERV@BUCKNELL.EDU)

The International Association for Feminist Economics (IAFFE) has a World Wide Web site at http://www.bucknell.edu/~jshackel/iaffe/

About the Author

Julie A. Nelson is Associate Professor of Economics at Brandeis University. She holds a B.A. degree in Economics from St. Olaf College (1978), and M.A. (1982) and Ph.D. (1986) degrees in Economics from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She has previously served as a research economist with the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and as an Assistant and Associate Professor at the University of California, Davis. Her research interests include the exploration of the relation of feminist theory to the definition and methodology of the economics discipline, as well as the empirical analysis of household demand behavior. She is author of *Feminism, Objectivity, and Economics* (Routledge, 1996) and coeditor of *Beyond Economic Man: Feminist Theory and Economics* (University of Chicago Press, 1993). She is also the author of numerous articles in both her areas of research, which have appeared in journals as diverse as *Econometrica, The Journal of Political Economy*, and *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*.

Reader Comment

Discipline Analysis Essay: Economics

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- ☐ an administrator
- ☐ other (what?_____)

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- ☐ none
- ☐ one or two courses as an undergraduate
- ☐ undergraduate major
- ☐ some graduate training
- ☐ master's degree training
- ☐ Ph.D. degree training

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Publications of the National Center for Curriculum Transformation Resources on Women

WOMEN IN THE CURRICULUM

The following publications consist of directories, manuals, and essays covering the primary information needed by educators to transform the curriculum to incorporate the scholarship on women. The publications have been designed to be brief, user friendly, and cross referenced to each other. They can be purchased as a set or as individual titles. Tables of contents and sample passages are available on the National Center Web page: http://www.towson.edu/ncctrw/.

➢ ***Directory of Curriculum Transformation Projects and Activities in the U.S.***

The *Directory* provides brief descriptions of 237 curriculum transformation projects or activities from 1973 to the present. It is intended to help educators review the amount and kinds of work that have been occurring in curriculum transformation on women and encourage them to consult project publications (see also *Catalog of Resources*) and to contact project directors for more information about projects of particular interest and relevance to their needs.

386 pages, 8½ x 11 hardcover, $30 individuals, $45 institutions, ISBN 1-885303-07-6

➢ ***Catalog of Curriculum Transformation Resources***

The *Catalog* lists materials developed by curriculum transformation projects and national organizations that are available either free or for sale. These include proposals, reports, bibliographies, workshop descriptions, reading lists, revised syllabi, classroom materials, participant essays, newsletters, and other products of curriculum transformation activities, especially from those projects listed in the *Directory*. These resources provide valuable information, models, and examples for educators leading and participating in curriculum transformation activities.

(Available fall 1997)

➢ ***Introductory Bibliography for Curriculum Transformation***

The *Introductory Bibliography* provides a list of references for beginning curriculum transformation on women, especially for those organizing projects and activities for faculty and teachers. It does not attempt to be comprehensive but rather to simplify the process of selection by offering an "introduction" that will lead you to other sources.

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